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THE INTELLECTUAL DESIGN OF JOHN DRYDEN'S HEROIC PLAYS

by

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Review by Ferrick Gray

This interesting little book, from its style of writing, is clearly the author's thesis or something close to it. However, this is of no concern because the content is well written and Anne Barbeau's (Barbeau from here) arguments are well supported by research and insightful interpretation.

The book itself is handsomely bound and presented. A green 5.5" x 8.5" hardcover with gold inlaid author, title and publisher along the spine. A rather plain dust jacket, possibly the norm for a university publication.

As the title would imply, the major discussion involves Dryden's five heroic plays, these being **The Indian Queen**, **The Indian Emperour**, **Tyrannic Love**, **The Conquest of Granada** and **Aureng-Zebe**. Together there is a minor treatment of two of Dryden's narrative poems, **Astraea Redux** and **Annus Mirabilis**. Thus, there is quite a body of work that has been covered in the 208 pagged discussion.

John Dryden was a prominent poet, dramatist and critic of the late seventeenth century. Today, it is likely that very few have heard of him. Libraries would have pushed this work to the back shelves, if indeed you were able to find them at all. Hence, a breath of fresh air to read such an analysis presented here by Barbeau.

Now the point of Barbeau's in-depth analysis is to show that Dryden's heroic dramas were in fact informed by a clear and well-defined scheme of values. This was not believed to be the case, and critics have misinterpreted the composition of his heroic dramas. All this sounds impressive, but what does it mean? A question that is comprehensively answered in due course.

For those of us who have never written a play, we may sit back and wonder how it is done. It is not merely a story because words must be put in the mouths of actors. Such information does not always come easily. Clearly there is some method of planning required. We have the plot, the place, the characters and how each interacts with the other. It is not only the act of a poet, although for this type of play, a poet is necessary.

An interesting point, but not at all damaging, is that Barbeau does not directly define what is meant by a *heroic play* or *heroic drama*. It does not take long to form a conclusion about the matter, but an initial statement or definition would have been useful to prevent any possible misunderstanding. The fact that if you were reading this book, you would already know, does not mean that its exclusion is warranted.

It should be noted, and this was not clearly stated, that Dryden invented the term *heroic drama* for his plays (referencing **The Conquest of Granada**). The terminology and process have likely been perfected at this time. Essentially, it is not until after the first two chapters and partially into the third that we come to make a definite statement for ourselves regarding the requirements of Dryden's *heroic dramas*. There are three main requirements:

1. They are written in (*strict*) *heroic verse*, being closed couplets in iambic pentameter.
2. The play focuses on *an image of human nature*.
3. The hero must be *a pattern for imitation*.

Thus, Dryden had developed a plan or composition process for his *heroic plays*.

To come to this realization so far into the book is not so much a problem as it is an omission. An earlier chapter deals with Hobbes and Filmer. This is not only interesting from a historical perspective, but useful in seeing how each may have (or has) influenced Dryden and the nature of his characters.

The bulk of Barbeau's work centers on the *reading* of the five heroic plays. This chapter would still be of interest even if you had not read the plays. However, there are a lot of comparisons between the plays when dealing with a *specific play*, and I would say there are too many. To some extent, the material comes as being repetitive as all plays have a similar or related theme.

One layout decision which is more a printer/publisher choice to cut the number of pages is that of merging quoted couplets, or part thereof, into the main body of text. Other quoted text is clearly identifiable by its indentation and separation from the main text. It would have been better to consistently follow the second format and perhaps make supporting arguments clearer.

At this point (the end of chapter 3), there does not appear to be much of any substance that would justify the title. Although Barbeau has managed to hold some interest, the placement of the fourth chapter, *Dryden's Dramatic Technique*, has finally brought the argument into a clearness and understanding of what is to be achieved. We should say that this chapter is crucial to the arguments and cements the fact that Dryden did use *a clear and well-defined scheme of values*. Topics considered here are *Dryden's Dramatic Technique*, *The Importance of Design*, the most informative *Delight, Admiration and Instruction* and *Poetic Norms*.

The final chapter comparing Dryden's *heroic plays* with his poetry could easily have been omitted. I do not believe it adds anything to Barbeau's already strong argument or that there was anything to be gained in comparing a play with a narrative poem. It shows some interest, but it does move away from the initial argument, especially with its placement at the end. **Astraea Redux** is written in the same heroic or riming couplets whereas **Annus Mirabilis** is written in quatrains (abab).

The conclusion is brief and to the point, but the leading paragraph lacks the excitement of having proved the point regarding Dryden's heroic plays. Some restructuring of the first and second paragraphs would have made the conclusion more powerful. The mention of the two poems in a conclusion involving the heroic plays is very out of place.

Nevertheless, these criticisms are minor. Barbeau has produced an exemplary argument for the case. It is well researched, stated simply and presented well. In short, **The Intellectual Design of John Dryden's Heroic Plays** serves as a valuable resource and steppingstone for other investigations involving Dryden's work.